



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

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FIRST PERSON A natural leader

Julio Contreras has changed the life of many displaced families in Cartagena through a cooperative that employs vulnerable people.



Photo Credit: FUPAD por Karl Grobl

“We received help and now we want to support other displaced families. In the cooperative everybody earns a basic wage and we are paying social security for all the employees.”

— Julio Contreras, USAID beneficiary

Julio Contreras is the General Manager of ALIPROCAR Foods, a successful sausage processing plant, in Cartagena, Colombia. He grew up in the Afro-Colombian farming community of Unguia, Chocó, a conflict-riddled region in the northwestern part of the country. In 2001, his family was threatened by one of the illegal armed groups fighting for power and narco-trafficking routes through the area.

Fearing for their lives, they abandoned their home and made the long trip to Cartagena to begin anew. *“I used to be a farmer but the illegal armed groups forced me to leave my homeland. I did it at the right time. Two months later they murdered my older brother”*, said Julio. Leaving everything behind, Julio arrived in Cartagena with less than \$60 in his pocket, only to have it stolen by petty thieves.

The move was difficult for Julio and his family, as they were accustomed to rural life and did not have the job skills needed to find work in the city. A family friend loaned Julio a small thermos and he began selling hot coffee on the streets to support his family.

Life was bleak until Julio heard about the work being done by ACTUAR por BOLIVAR, a USAID supported NGO that provides social and economic assistance to the men, women and children displaced by the drug-fueled violence in Colombia.

He enrolled in ACTUAR’s program and received psychological counseling to help him come to terms with the many changes taking place in his life. He met other people who had been displaced and were confronting similar challenges. ACTUAR helped Julio develop a “plan de vida” or roadmap for his new life. With ACTUAR’s assistance, Julio and his new friends received business skills training and small loans to form a cooperative to make sausages in the community where they lived. The sausages were a great success and the business now generates more than 100 direct and indirect jobs.

“We received help and now we want to support other displaced families. In the cooperative everybody earns a basic wage and we are paying social security for all the employees”, said Julio. He is optimistic that he can help other people who find themselves in the same situation he was in just a few short years ago.